University of Timbuktu

The **University of Timbuktu** is a collective term for the teaching associated with three mosques in the city of Timbuktu in what is now Mali: the masajid (mosques) of Sankore, Djinguereber, and Sidi Yahya.[1] It was not a university in the modern sense, but a loosely organized scholastic community that endured for many centuries during the medieval period.

History

Timbuktu quickly grew in importance by the start of the 12th century, with a thriving economy based on trading salt, gold, spices and dyes. As the wealth of the city grew, it also became a center of learning, attracting scholars and manuscripts.[2] It acquired a reputation for learning and scholarship across the Muslim world.

According to African scholar Shamil Jeppie in *The Meanings of Timbuktu*:

> ...Timbuktu is a repository of history, a living archive which anybody with a concern for African history should be acquainted with. Timbuktu may be hard to get to but it played an essential role as a centre of scholarship under the Songhay state until the invasion from the rulers of Marrakesh in 1591, and even thereafter it was revived.[3]

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After Timbuktu was occupied because of the 1591 Battle of Tondibi, the university went into decline.[1] In 1593, Ahmad I al-Mansur cited "disloyalty" as the reason for arresting, and subsequently killing or exiling, many of Timbuktu's scholars, including Ahmad Baba al Massufi.[4]

The university

The University of Timbuktu was unlike the modern university in that there was no central organization or formal course of study. Instead, there were several independent schools, each having its own principal instructor. Students chose their teachers, and instruction took place in mosque courtyards or private residences. The primary focus was on study of the Quran and Islamic subjects, but academic subjects were also taught,[1] such as "medicine and surgery, anatomy, botany, evolution, physiology and zoology, astronomy, anthropology, cartography, geodesy, geology, mathematics, physics, chemistry, philosophy, language and linguistics, geography, history, as well as art."[5] Teachers associated with the Sankore mosque and the mosque itself were especially respected for learning.[1][2]

It boasted up to 25,000 students out of a total city population of 100,000.[6]

Noted scholars associated with the institution include:[5]

- Mohammed Bagayogo (1523-1593), associated with the Sankore masajid
- Ahmad Baba al Massufi (1556-1627), a student of Mohammed Bagayogo and the author of more than 40 books; deported to Morocco in 1594

The Mosques

The ‘University of Timbuktu’ was associated with three Mosques and made Timbuktu an important centre for when it came to the propagation of Islamic culture. The Djingareyber Mosque was initially built when Sultan Kankan Moussa had returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca, but was reconstructed between 1570 and 1583 by Imam Al Aqib, who was the Qadi of Timbuktu. He added the southern portion of the mosque as well as the wall which surrounds the cemetery which is situated to the west of it. The Djingareyber Mosque minaret is among the most noticeable landmarks of the Timbuktu landscape with its dominating structure. The next Mosque,

the Sankore Mosque, followed a similar trend to the Djingareyber Mosque in the sense that it was restored by the Imam Al Aqib in the 14th century between 1578 and 1582. The sanctuary was knocked down and rebuilt to be in accordance with the dimensions of the Kaaba of Mecca. The third and final Mosque, the Sidi Yahia Mosque, located to the south of the aforementioned Sankore Mosque, was erected at around 1400 by the marabout Sheikh El Moktar Hamalla. It was built with the expectation of a holy man who would emerge some forty years later as Cherif Sidi Yahia, who would then be chosen as the Imam. Much like the other two Mosques, Sidi Yahia was also restored by Imam Al Aqib from 1577-1588. These Mosques of Timbuktu have played a key role in the expansion of Islam in the African continent at this fairly early stage. The three Mosques of Timbuktu have lived through the golden age of when Timbuktu was an intellectual and spiritual centre of the Askia dynasty. In addition to that, these three Mosques are also witnesses to the commercial role that Timbuktu played in the southern trans-Saharan trading route. These Mosques are also prime examples of earthen architecture and of traditional maintenance techniques, something which continues to persist to the present day[7]

Notable scholars

Ahmad Baba

Abu 'l-'Abbas Ahmad Baba bin Ahmad bin Ahmad bin 'Umar bin Muhammad Aqit al-Sinhaji, al-Timbukti was born at Araouane on 21 Dhu 'l-Hijja 963/26 October 1556. He was raised in Timbuktu where he began studying under his father Ahmad, his uncle Abu Bakr and Ahmad b. Mohammad, who was a more distant relative of his. However, his principal teacher was Muhammad b. Mahmud b. Abu Bakr al-Wangari, a well known and respected scholar at the time. He studied the main disciplines pertaining to Islamic learning of his time under Wangari, including 'arabiyya, bayan, usul, mantiq and tafsir, with his speciality being on Maliki fiqh. Little is known about Timbukti's scholarly work in Timbuktu prior to his deportation to Morocco in 1594 with many of the other members of the Aqit family he belonged to, a family at the time known for producing scholars, since they were accused of undermining the rule and authority of the Moroccan invaders. He arrived in Marrakesh on 1 Ramadan 1002/21 May 1594, where he was either jailed or at the very least put under house arrest. This was for two years until he was released on 21 Ramadan 1004/19 May 1596. However, the Sultan had decided to keep him in Morocco. He taught at the Jami' al-Shurafa' in Marrakesh during his time in Morocco, and attracted many students and even scholars to come hear him. Although not much is known about the chronology of his works, he most definitely wrote the Nail al-ibtihaj, his major work, as well as its abridgement, Kifayat al-muhtaj, whilst he was still in Morocco. Timbukti, after being released by the Sultan Moulay Zaidan, had finally arrived back in Timbuktu on 10 Dhu 'l-Qa'da 1016/26 February 1608. The Nail al-ibtihaj bi-tatriz al-Dibaj was his greatest contribution to scholarship and was a biographical dictionary of Maliki jurisprudents, containing within it a voluminous amount of information on North African scholars and is the primary source of information for when it comes to the life and works produced by medieval West African Muslim scholars. He died on 6 Sha'ban 1036/22 April 1627.[8]

Manuscripts

The Timbuktu manuscripts was produced in the Arabic script and was primarily written in the Arabic language but other local languages such as Fulfulde, Songhai, Soninke and Bambara were also featured. In regards to the physical appearance of these manuscripts, they were mainly found in a collection of loose leaves placed within a loose cover or even just tightened with a ribbon. Due to the lack of a sewing structure or any link between the text blocks and covers, knowing whether any bookbinding structures existed or not is a difficult task for many codicologists. What further complicates this is that covers wrapping numerous leaves may have been moved from one text block to another. A manuscript could consist of a variety of texts and documents and can be made of a varying number of leaves ranging from just a few to a few hundred. Today, the Timbuktu manuscripts are primarily preserved in private families which are where they have traditionally been kept and in the Ahmed Baba Institute, a state run entity[9]

However, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) captured northern Mali and destroyed many of the manuscripts in an attempt to implement their jihad against any idea or practice which did not conform to their own vision of a pure Islamic society. However, AQIM had only destroyed a portion of the manuscripts[10] as most of them were taken outside of the city to the capital, Bamako, in an initiative led by Abdel Kader Haidara,[11] the son of a respected Malian scholar, Mohammed 'Mamma' Haidara, who in addition to being a scholar was also the owner of a family library which had a considerable amount of manuscripts.[12] Haidara did this with

the help of the NGO SAVAMA-DCI (Sauvegarde et Valorisation des Manuscripts pour la Défense de la Culture Islamique), which Haidara is the Executive President of.[13] Haidara worked alongside members of the local community in an effort to remove the manuscripts from areas which were susceptible to AQIM activity[14]

External links

- Islamic Manuscripts from Mali- *U.S. Library of Congress*

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